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Joanne Aono Interview

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Interviewer: Charlie Lacke

Artist: Joanne Aono

In person interview – artist's studio Chicago, IL

May 12, 2013

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Photo by Charlie Lacke

Bio: Joanne Aono is a Japanese American Sansei artist, born in Chicago. She received a BFA from Drake University with post graduate classes through the SAIC.

Solo and two person exhibitions of her paintings and drawings include South Shore Arts, Images Gallery, Eyeporium Gallery, Dayton Street, and 303 Erie Artspace, with an upcoming solo show at the Lee Dulgar Gallery. Joanne has shown in numerous group exhibitions including Julius Caesar, Contemporary Art Workshop, Governor's State University, Woman Made Gallery, Beverly Art Center, Northern Illinois University, and Art Chicago International. She has received City of Chicago Arts grants in addition to a Virginia Center for the Creative Arts fellowship. Her art has been reviewed in publications such as ArtLetter, NewCity, Northwest Indiana Times, and the Huffington Post.

“The dualities of being a Japanese American as well as an identical twin are underlying themes in my art. I use visual and conceptual pairings to depict these contrasts and similarities of maintaining a collective identity while projecting a sense of individuality. Text in my art is Influenced by Japanese calligraphic forms and the hidden meanings that words possess. The writings are obscured, exploring interpretation, memory, knowledge, reading, and retention.”
– bio courtesy of the artist.

www.JoanneAono.com

Interview Transcript:

Charlie Lacke: Ok, I got it all set up... So, you're a twin. Are you identical, or...

Joanne Aono: I'm an identical twin.

CL: So what was it like growing up as a twin and a Japanese American?

JA: It was very interesting. Having a twin gives you a best friend immediately and for life, and... it was kind of strange being both because we were a double oddity. We were born in Chicago, but as two twin Asian girls, you automatically look different from everybody. Y'know, everyone always wanted us to dress the same, so they'd always give our parents two of the same dresses, even though my parents didn't want to do that. We'd always have our hair different, we'd always try and do something different. As we got older, my family moved around quite a bit, so by fifth grade, we had been in [pauses] five different locations. And so we had to change schools quite a bit, and I don't know if you've ever been a new kid in a new school ... so you're this new kid and the places we moved to had no other Asians, like Grand Rapids, Michigan or Atlanta, Georgia, and so we were the only Asians in the whole school, my family. I have an older brother and an older sister, and a younger sister, and so we'd be very, very [pauses] "strange". It was already strange to have identical twins, but also to be the only Asian kids in a mostly white school.

CL: Right, that's two layers of being different, and maybe, as a kid, you don't want to be different.

JA: Right, especially when you're a kid. I think that, when you're older, it defines you but when you're a kid, you just wanna fit in.

CL: That creating an individual image for yourself, does that factor into your art?

JA: Definitely. And it's part of the dualities that I deal with. And i see this as universal for all people, whether you're Asian, African-American, Italian American... Whatever your culture is, it's like this struggle between wanting to be different and wanting to assimilate. And as a twin, I always tried to be different, you know I wanted to show I was different from my twin sister. And as an Asian kid in a classroom, you're trying to say 'No, I'm the same as everyone else.' So, I deal a lot with the struggle to find similarities and differences. It's universal, the differences between being male and female, being straight and gay...

CL: Definitely. And I notice a lot of duality in... [Interviewer pauses to point to art on wall of studio]

JA: Definitely, yeah. In (Tomi & Yuki Series), all the words are words relating to being... As a twin, the weird part is that no matter what age you are, no one has any issue with coming up to you and saying, 'Oh, you're fatter than she is', or 'she's taller than you.' [Laughs] And it would be weird if you were a single person, to have someone come up and say, "You're fatter than the guy across the room." Or "Your nose is more upturned."

CL: [Laughs]

JA: So those pieces deal with those sort of words, like "fatter" or "taller." And another thing is that everyone assumes that one twin is the bossier twin and the other is the more subservient twin. So those two panels, I drew them both the same, but if you go up closer, you can see there are differences. And that's how I feel about people getting to know individuals. You can say that this guy looks like that guy, but when you get to know them you see differences.

CL: Right, they're different like human beings. So, over time, has your style or tone changed?

JA: Oh definitely. I started out as a figurative artist. Gradually, the idea of using words came to me well after graduating college. My grandfather, who immigrated from Japan, he owned a brownstone in Edgewater, and that's where I grew up.¹ He lived on one floor, and relatives lived on another. I grew up being around my grandparents, and in their home, there were a lot of Japanese paintings and wallhangings, and there was a lot of Japanese writing on them. And, as a kid, I didn't know it was writing. To me, it was this beautiful image. So, over time, I realized that they were words and that they meant things. And that stuck with me that letter forms, no matter what language, are really beautiful and within them is this meaning, and that meaning has different layers that mean different things to different people. I like that idea of, the beauty visually of letters. And that's why I use a lot of text in my work, and the text is all researched, my own writings. It's supposed to have many layers and to be not quite decipherable. And that goes back to what it means to get to know a person, that it's not just on the surface, you have to dig for it.

CL: So when you're in the city, do you have any place you like to work?

JA: My studio! [Laughs]

CL: [Laughs] That makes the most sense. Do you have anywhere to go for inspiration?

JA: I do spend a lot of time looking out at the lake. I love the lake, and it's something I feel is significant to the city of Chicago, and it kind of goes to my idea of getting to know people. One thing I like to do with my husband is we walk along the lakefront and we collect the fossils and the crinoids like I have on my shelf. And I like to read about them... I have all these books here about fossils and Lake Michigan. And it's just amazing to me and know that the lakes were

¹ Edgewater is a neighborhood on the far north side of Chicago, near Lake Michigan.

formed by the glaciers, so many years ago, and how many different episodes of life have happened during that time. I like that there are hidden meanings in the lake, and you can stare out and see the beauty of it, but underneath, there are other stories happening. That goes along with my writings, too. And another thing is that my last name, Aono, translates to "blue fields".

CL: Ah, so you have an extra connection to the water.

JA: [Laughs] Yes.

CL: And another thing about your art is that it has a unique, minimalistic approach. What's the choice you're making there?

JA: It's what I'm comfortable with. I do like simplicity. I do like minimal art. I think that there is a calmness to it that I'm comfortable with, even though there are artists that I like that are extremely colorful and expressive. For me, when I sit down to do my art, it usually comes out as more intimate and calm.

CL: What was your favorite series to work on?

JA: [Pauses] You know... It's always the next one. [Laughs] Because at any given time, I have ten different ideas all for the future, but I'm always looking forward to the next one.

CL: Good answer. [Both laugh] So, you've talked about addressing being a twin and the struggles associated with that. Do you think you address the Asian identity?

JA: Similarly, because I think it goes along with the idea of being a twin. Because, for me, there's the contrast between identity and assimilation. The influences of being Asian American are always there. I grew up in a household where everything from the food to the furniture was somewhat influenced by being Japanese American. So I think that my aesthetics are always going to lean that direction, just because of being surrounded by it, that sort of culture.

CL: Have you ever been contextualized in an exhibit as "Asian American", or have you ever been labeled an "Asian-American artist"?

JA: I have, actually. A show with Laura [Laura Kina - the interviewer's instructor], curated by Larry Lee and Johanna Silva, and it was just all Asian American artists.² There have been several instances where I have been sought out because of my Asian American background. I don't that... [Pauses] I know that there are a lot of artists labeled as Asian American artists. I don't think that I... [Pauses]

² 210 BamBUDDHead!, portage ARTspace, Chicago, IL. Curators: Johanna Silva and Larry Lee.

CL: Identify?

JA: Yeah. Sometimes I will, but I don't think I'm always considered that because I think my art is a little more universal.

CL: Do you think that identifying as Asian, or Asian American, is something important to you?

JA: Definitely. I think that for everybody, whatever their culture is. I know some people don't even realize what their culture is. I think it's really important for who they are, and to be an artist, you really have to draw from who you are.

CL: Over time, do you think that exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you?

JA: [Pauses to think] I think they've gotten better because I know more people. When you're just out of school is the toughest time, but as you become more known as an artist, and get to know more people, it opens up.

CL: So, for the final question, what are you currently working on?

JA: I am currently working on very large drawings that are based on... Basically, based on blue fields. So they're going to have the water aspect to it. But they're two large drawings at a time, so they're still dealing with the twin aspect.

END.